

# THE WEDDING-GIFT

BY GRACE SARTWELL MASON

WITH A DRAWING BY E. M. ASHE

ONE of Barbara's reasons for accepting me was the fact that I was not prosperous.

"If you were," she said, "we should have to live on the West Side, with a velvet carpet in the parlor, two maids, and a mission dining-room. The parlor and the mission dining-room would bore me to tears, and I'd about as soon keep a rubber-plant as two maids."

I assured her there was no immediate prospect of my having any of these commonly prized adjuncts. Art, as she knew, was long; its votaries must find their happiness not in gross material wealth, but in the finer coinage of ideas, of the creative fancy—

"Exactly," interrupted Barbara, warmly. "We are *not* like other people. The conventional things of life, such as houses and furniture and—regular meals, you know—would hamper us. We must live for our art. Nothing else matters."

And on this basis we set up our gods in Greenwich Village, at the top of a rambling old house. The good north light attracted me, and the irregularity of the rooms pleased Barbara. We covered the walls with burlap in a sad, artistic tint; made a kitchen out of a screen and two biscuit-boxes; thinly disguised our steamer-trunks under a bit of Flemish tapestry, and hung our Hokusai to the best advantage.

Our housekeeping was of the lightest. It was positively airy on those days when Barbara wooed her muse; but, as she said, who would be the slave to a breakfast or luncheon hour? As long as one was at peace with one's artistic conscience, what mattered meals? At night we rubbed from our brows the wrinkles of work and dined out, with

other demi-celebrities and demi-semi-celebrities, in a soothing atmosphere of pink-shaded candles and artistic shop-talk.

Our impromptu suppers, when Benson, the artist, or the clever Fenways, or Jimmy Dick dropped in, were hilariously successful. Of course, the next morning was apt to be rather disagreeably untidy, with sticky dishes all about the place and empty olive-bottles in the bathtub. And there was usually the janitor to pacify—on account of Jimmy Dick's noise.

But Barbara liked it. She said it appealed to her imagination—"like living one of Mürger's stories, you know." I think she knew how pretty she was in my painting-smock.

She made a joke of the inconvenience of keeping one's best clothes in boxes under the bed, and declared, even as she groveled in search of her hat with the pink plumes, that the life exactly suited her.

We worked hard, and happily. If we were sometimes a little crowded, we were at least not dull. And then there came Uncle Peter's wedding-present.

I had never quite believed in Barbara's Uncle Peter. He lived in a vague limbo, known as the Northwest, and there was a tradition in Barbara's family that he was vastly wealthy; but inasmuch as none of them had seen or heard from him in years, it seemed to me highly probable that he was one of those pleasant myths no household should be without. Barbara was specially fond of the Uncle Peter tradition. She had sent him an announcement of our marriage, addressed in simple faith to "None"; and when a lean week was upon the Greenwich flat, she cheered herself by



"I'LL NOT LET HIM HARM YOU, BARBARA"



considering what she would do if Uncle Peter should send us a gold nugget or some mining-stock for a wedding-gift.

I had lifted the voice of scorn so often against this relative of Barbara's that when she telephoned me one day that there was a letter from Uncle Peter I told her I had no time for fairy tales.

"But it's true!" she cried over the telephone. "He's written, and he's sending a wedding-gift. And he says, 'Take good care of the present I'm sending, and it will reward you.' Now doesn't that mean nuggets or mining-stock?"

"Sounds like a Bible to me," I said, and Barbara rang off sharply.

But in spite of myself, I was curious about this revival of Uncle Peter, so I put away my drawing-board—I was at work in the Zoo making sketches for Headley's "Wild Animals in Their Native Haunts"—and went home early.

I found Barbara sitting on the floor, and about her there billowed a sea of steamship literature. I should state here that Barbara cherished a dream of a year in Europe; and whenever she sold a tale, or I drew a successful beast, our flat was flooded with booklets setting forth the allurements of every place on earth but home. When I saw her thus surrounded, I concluded that she must have landed a serial; but, on inquiry, I found it was Uncle Peter's letter that had so uplifted her.

"I feel it in my bones," she cried, "that he's sending nuggets, or a cunning bag of gold-dust!"

Such is the infection of Barbara's optimism that I scoffed but weakly, and that night we celebrated on our expectations. After a dinner that we could not afford, we came home and spread out all the steamship epics on the table. We decided on Florence and Fiesole for the winter, with a few weeks in Paris; we got out "Italian Backgrounds" and somebody on "Medieval Towns," and we had altogether a joyous evening.

## II

NEXT morning the present came. It took two strong men to drag it in. It was in a box about the size of our bath-room, with slats across the front. Through these there peered the blood-shot eyes of a huge animal.

"You've made a mistake," I said sternly to the men; but Barbara, who had been reading the card on the box, cried out that it was the wedding-present from Uncle Peter, and fell into a chair.

I cannot classify the sort of seizure Barbara had when the men were gone. It seemed like hysterics mixed with a fit of temper.

"Barbara, calm yourself!" I besought her.

"I c-can't—it's so funny, and I'm so m-mad!"

"Well, then, I'm going to let the beast out," I said.

The threat had instant effect. Bab stopped gurgling and jumped up.

"He may eat us alive!" she cried.

But I had been peering through the slats at the wedding-gift, and I felt much braver.

"I'll not let him harm you, Barbara," I said, and began to pry the slats from the box.

Barbara armed herself with a Tanagra figurine and climbed into the Morris chair. When the last slat was off, I stepped aside hastily; for the beast, with a roar, precipitated itself into the room.

I may as well get over this painful portion of my narrative as rapidly as possible. It is sufficient to state that to us—to us in a New York flat—our dear Uncle Peter had sent a Siberian blood-hound. The beast gamboled about with the airy grace of a rhinoceros, knocking over chairs and Barbara's tea-table with the wagging of his tail.

"I shall offer him for sale," I said disgustedly, "but what shall we do with him in the meantime? He's too big to be imprisoned in the bath-room, and the police won't allow him on the fire-escape."

"Oh, oh, look at him now!" cried Barbara.

Over his pendulous chops and his fierce red eyes a smile seemed to pass. He began a mincing shuffle toward Barbara, the droop of his tail seeming to say, "Don't be afraid, little girl," and laid his great head softly on her foot.

"Why, he's *taken* to me!" cried my wife, and I knew from her tone we were going to keep the beast.

There is no use urging expediency where Barbara's affections are concerned.

She had fallen in love with her wedding-present; the dog had the tact to adore her, and keep him we must.

We sadly put away the steamship literature and the guides to Italy, and did some extra pot-boilers to keep Little Sunshine in food. What it cost me to silence the janitor, I am ashamed to record; and as for the nice old lady in the next flat, she has never been the same since. It was a darkish day when she met Sunshine in the hall. I heard her shrieks and rushed out. In the corner she was dancing a wild fling of terror, while Sunshine, looking as pleasant as a hungry hippopotamus, frolicked about her, trying to be friends.

This will illustrate his general reception. The poor dog had a perpetual craving for friends; but his appearance was against him. When Bab walked down the street with him, people whose hands he tried to lick fell away from him with shrieks, and mothers snatched their babies out of his path. As Barbara kept explaining, he had the gentlest nature; but no one believed her, and we were in a fair way to be sacrificed on the altar of our loyalty to Uncle Peter's gift.

Coming home from the Zoo one day, I was met in the hall by Barbara.

"Thank Heaven," she said as she seized me, "that we kept Sunshine!"

"Why?" I asked. "Has he bitten a book-agent?"

"No; but Uncle Peter has come all the way from the West to see if we are good to the dog!"

"I hope he realizes now," I said, somewhat bitterly, "the inappropriateness of his gift."

"I can't make him out," said Barbara.

But I could. He was evidently a man with a subterranean sense of humor. He saw the joke of what he had done; also, I suspected he saw a joke in us and our ménage. He was an apple-cheeked old fellow, with keen blue eyes and a dry smile always hovering about the corners of his mouth.

He was as much interested in us and our manner of living as if we were Aztec cliff-dwellers. We gathered that he had supposed Greenwich to be a rural community, and that he had sent us the dog to protect Barbara from tramps while I was in the city.

"I s'pose," he said with a quaint twist to his smile, after we had shown him all our clever, space-saving schemes, "there's lots of people livin' like this—with their best hats under the bed and the cheese on the window-sill?"

"Plenty of them—and geniuses, too," we assured him.

"But," he persisted mildly, "if they'd move out into the country they'd have room to stretch in, and a dooryard and posy-beds and shade-trees and—"

"We don't *care* for the conventional way of living," interrupted Barbara. "Art absorbs us. The true artist would not be hampered by houses or furniture. Of course, it would be nice to have a little more room, on Sunshine's account; but, as for ourselves, we are *quite* happy, and the flat is *quite* big enough!"

"Mebbe, mebbe," Uncle Peter chuckled as he rose to go; "but"—and he turned to look slyly at her—"you'd be hard put to it to find room for a youngster or two, now wouldn't you?"

"Vulgar old man!" said Barbara when he had gone, and then she dimpled. "But he's lovely, too—so naive and primitive!"

I was not so rash in my classification of Uncle Peter; for it occurred to me, as he dined or lunched with us during his stay in town, that he listened to our theories with a humor which was not entirely unsophisticated. We were sincerely sorry when the old gentleman came finally to announce his departure for Nome.

He had had a mighty good time, he said, and had learned a number of things. With this he chuckled, and laid upon the table an oblong slip of paper.

"That's my wedding-present," he explained. "It's a kind of bet with myself, too. You see, I've always said that if you go deep enough we're all pretty much alike, and right down at the bottom we're all after the same thing. But mebbe geniuses are different—I dunno," and he grinned slyly. "Anyway, you c'n hit the trail for Italy now—if you want to. Good-by, and let me know how you get along."

After he had gone, it was several minutes before Barbara or I had courage to look at the oblong piece of paper. Then Barbara made a little rush and held it up.

"Italy!" she cried. "I should say so—and Japan and Norway, if we like!"

Uncle Peter had certainly done handsomely by us. For the rest of the day we were in a state of dizzy excitement. We knocked off work, and went for a walk with Sunshine between us. We blessed the day that Uncle Peter had sent us a dog and Barbara had fallen in love with him; but we were in far too exalted a state to puzzle over what our generous relative had meant by his parting speech to us.

The next morning, after I had deposited the check, I should have gone to the Zoo to work, but instead I strolled around town, thinking incoherent and affluent thoughts. I meant to go to the steamship offices; but I met an acquaintance who was in real estate, and he persuaded me to go out and look at an old country place he was offering for sale. He said the trip would do me good, and I might find some bits worth sketching.

I knew I was wasting my time, but the country appealed to me—one gets a little stuffy tucked up in a Greenwich flat—and I went.

As I turned in at the gate and moved up the gravel walk, between rows of fine old maples, I was aware of something like a pang of desire. How roomy and cool and peaceful the old place looked! I went around to the back and sat down on the door-step.

After a long time I remembered poor Barbara. I gave a farewell look at the lovely, tangled old garden. I should be late for luncheon, but I'd appease Barbara by bringing her a fresh crop of steamship literature. I turned the corner of the house briskly; and there, on the front door-step, sat Barbara and Sunshine! Sunshine drooped his great head close to Barbara's; for Barbara was crying.

Deep down in my heart something unaccountably hurt me. I stole up softly and put my arm about her. She looked scared at first, and then ashamed; and then all her most defiant brightness came back to her. She began to tell how she had taken Sunshine out for a fresh-air excursion, and they had just dropped in there for a rest.

At this point I shook her gently.

"Be honest, Barbara," I said sternly.

"What are you doing here? Are you interested in real estate?"

"Well," she said, "I heard the old Standish place was for sale, and I got to thinking what a nice home it would make for Sunshine. He's seemed rather droopy lately, and—"

"What about Fiesole?" I hinted.

The words seemed to arouse in her a sudden tempest. She jumped to her feet and stretched out her arms to the quiet old trees and the lovely, tangled garden.

"I want a house!" she cried. "I want a really, truly home! I'm tired of keeping my clothes behind the piano and eating chafing-dish food. I'm tired of a janitor and people above and below me. I'm tired of the Fenways and all poseurs. I know I'm common and bourgeois, but I want a place where there's room for something besides art—flowers and a kitchen-range and dogs and plenty of clothes-presses and—and—children—"

Ah, dear little Barbara! The old trees looking down on us must have thought we were lovers long estranged and reconciled at last. The leaves seemed to rub their hands softly as if something pleased them.

"I know my nose is red," said Barbara after a while. "And where is Sunshine?"

Sunshine was discovered cooling his nose in the garden-mold, having been stung by a bee. We were making a soothing poultice of mud for him when Bab looked up at me soberly.

"I don't believe we're so different from other people, after all," she said, and then suddenly sat down in the onion-bed. "Why," she cried, "*that's what Uncle Peter bet the ten thousand dollars on!*"

"And he's won!" I shouted.

We sat side by side in the onion-bed and felt the burden of being different from other people roll from our shoulders. We were just commonplace happy, till finally the whiz of a distant trolley roused us.

"If you're bent on buying this place, Barbara," I said, "we'd better hurry back to town before some one gets in ahead of us."

And clapping the mud poultice on Sunshine's nose, we joined hands and ran for the car.

